AN OUTBREAK OF HEPATITIS C AND HIV IN NORTHERN IRELAND IN PEOPLE WHO INJECT DRUGS

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Disclosure of Interest

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Background

Historically, HCV infection in PWID in Northern Ireland has been relatively low compared to other parts of the UK, and HIV infection rare.

In July 2020, a cluster of genotype 1a HCV cases was detected on sequencing. An IMT was established, contact tracing and BBV testing was undertaken, which identified a number of additional cases of HCV as well as a cluster of HIV.

Methods

Risk factor information was gathered via enhanced surveillance. Confirmed cases were defined as new diagnoses of HCV and/or HIV which were part of a phylogenetic cluster from 1 January 2017. Probable cases had a positive PCR result and met epidemiological criteria of PWID and/or sexual contact of a PWID with no sequencing results available. Social network analysis was completed for the HIV cluster.

Results

To date, 119 confirmed cases of been associated with this cluster, including 20 re-infections, and 10 confirmed and 8 probable cases of HIV. Two thirds of the cases of HCV were males, one third female, with median age 30 (range 19-48); and for HIV there was an even split between genders, and median age 28.5 (23-43). The outbreak is predominantly in heterosexuals. The most common risk factors are PWID, homelessness, and prison; 71 HCV cases having all three. Social network analysis found a densely networked cohort of individuals, with several risk factors of PWID and sexual contact.

Conclusion

This is the largest outbreak of HIV and HCV in Northern Ireland, affecting a young population group who experience multiple disadvantages. The density of BBV testing in the high risk populations, and sequencing of all positive samples was instrumental in bringing this outbreak to light. The close relationships between services and service users permitted thorough epidemiological investigation, the results of which are being used to target control measures and prevent onward transmission.